

BELIZE 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom to express one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion.

In January, the government expanded the title and scope of the Ministry of Public Service and Constitutional and Political Reform to include Religious Affairs, with the stated objective of improving the government's communication with all the country's religious agroups and organizations. Methodist Bishop Alvin Moses Benguche continued to serve as the church senator with a constitutional mandate to represent all religious groups in the National Assembly. According to Reverend Lance Lewis of the National Evangelical Association of Belize (NEAB) and Benguche of the Belize Council of Churches (BCC), they favorably viewed the government's interactions with their respective organizations and supported the creation of the new ministerial portfolio. Representatives of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community, however, expressed concern regarding the creation of the new office. In May, a coalition of churches, including the BCC and NEAB, formally requested Governor General Froyla Tzalam, who represents the British monarch as head of state, to call a national referendum on the legalization of cannabis after a majority in parliament approved legalization on March 31. According to Senator Benguche, some religious leaders remained deeply opposed to the legislation as well as to proposed antidiscrimination bills, which some religious leaders believed could change the definition of marriage. In February, Prime Minister John Briceño attended the opening of the new Ahmadiyya Muslim Noor Mosque in Belize City and stated the group "has played a positively influential role in the lives of many ... to build a brotherhood and a community" in the country." In November, the government officially launched the People's Constitutional Commission, which

includes a principal commissioner representing the BCC and an alternate representing the Belize Association of Evangelical Churches (BAEC).

In June, the father of a five-year-old boy said two private primary schools had discriminated against his child because the schools refused to admit the child unless he cut off his dreadlocks, a hairstyle that was in accordance with Rastafarian beliefs. Religious groups continued collaboration with international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious affiliates, including local churches and civil society organizations, to support nationwide missionary work.

U.S. embassy officials, including the Chargé d’Affaires, reiterated the importance of religious tolerance in discussions with government officials, including the prime minister, minister of foreign affairs, and opposition representatives, and they encouraged the government to engage with a wide spectrum of religious groups. The embassy used social media to highlight the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 412,000 (midyear 2022). According to the most recent census from 2010, Roman Catholics are the largest religious group, accounting for 40 percent of the population. Protestants make up 32 percent, including Pentecostals (8 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5 percent), Anglicans (5 percent), Mennonites (4 percent), Baptists (4 percent), Methodists (3 percent), the Church of the Nazarene (3 percent), and the Salvation Army. There are also approximately 5,500 members of the Church of Christ. Members of Jehovah’s Witnesses make up 2 percent of the population, while other religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Rastafarians, Baha’is, and Soka Gakkai together

constitute 11 percent. Approximately 15 percent of the population does not affiliate with one of these religious organizations.

No religious group is a majority in any of the country's six districts. Catholics reside throughout the country. Mennonites and Pentecostals reside mostly in the rural areas of the Cayo and Orange Walk Districts.

The 2010 census lists 577 Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in the country. This statistic does not include the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at group, which, according to its leaders, numbers approximately 200. Some members of Indigenous groups, including the Maya and the Garifuna, practice traditional folk religious rituals.

Legal Framework

The preamble to the constitution acknowledges "the supremacy of God." The constitution provides for freedom of religion, freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom to express one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. It also provides for freedom, either alone or in community with others, to manifest and propagate one's religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. It states that no one may be compelled to take an oath contrary to one's religion or belief. The constitution also stipulates religious groups may establish places of education and states that "no such community shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for persons of that community." A rarely enforced law limits speech that is deemed "blasphemous or indecent."

By law, the BCC, a council that includes representatives from several major Christian denominations, and the BAEC alternate in the appointment of the church senator, with the governor general's concurrence. The BCC includes the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches, as well as the Salvation Army, the Chinese Christian Mission, Seventh-day Adventists, and the Young

Women's Christian Association. The BAEC includes evangelical Protestant groups, the Church of Christ, and the Assembly of God Church but excludes the NEAB. The church senator, by law, also represents non-Christian groups.

By law, the church senator provides advice on public policy affecting the political positions of religious groups. This senatorial seat places the political interests of religious leaders on par with three other senators, who are appointed to represent labor unions, the business community, and the NGO community. The Senate is the upper chamber of the country's bicameral National Assembly; the governor general appoints senators for a five-year term, while members of the House of Representatives run for election every five years.

The law requires all religious groups to register with the official Companies Registry in the Ministry of the Attorney General the same way a business would register. Registration allows a religious organization to operate legally in the country; receive state recognition; negotiate, sue, and be sued; own property; hire employees; and lend or borrow money. There is a one-time registration fee of 295 Belize dollars (\$148) and a yearly fee of five Belize dollars (\$2.50). Requirements for registration include a memorandum of association with the government delineating the group's objective and mission, an article of association, and a letter from the Central Bank if the organization has foreign financial contributors. The government may shut down the facilities of groups that do not register.

The government does not levy property taxes on churches and other places of worship. Other church-owned buildings occupied on a regular basis, such as clergy residences, are not tax-exempt. Religious organizations may also partner with the state to operate schools, hospitals, and other charitable organizations and, depending on funding availability, receive financial assistance from the government.

The public school curriculum includes weekly nondenominational "spirituality" classes incorporating morals and values. Government-supported, church-run

schools may teach lessons on world religions for students from kindergarten through high school as part of social studies curricula. These church-run schools also offer separate religious education classes that are specific to their own faith. While there is no official rule governing a student's ability to opt out of either of these classes, parents may decide their children will not attend. The constitution prohibits any educational institution from obligating a child to attend any religious ceremony or observance.

Due to insufficient government funds and preindependence agreements, Christian churches manage most public elementary schools, high schools, and some colleges. Churches comanage with the government approximately 60 percent of primary schools, 40 percent of high schools, and 50 percent of colleges. Churches that comanage educational institutions include the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, Nazarene, Salvation Army, evangelical Protestant, Presbyterian, Muslim, Pentecostal, and Mennonite Churches. Schools routinely observe Christian and other religious holidays at the schools' discretion. Non-Christian religious groups operate a few schools, such as the Muslim Community Primary School in Belize City. All schools, public and private, must incorporate the national education curriculum and adhere to government regulations under the monitoring of the Ministry of Education. Some Mennonite communities run primary schools in their villages, independent of Ministry of Education oversight and based on Mennonite religious teachings. Only some of these schools align with the national education curriculum for mathematics, science, and social studies.

The law grants respect for prison inmates' religious beliefs, and inmates may participate in religious activities in the country's sole prison. Religious leaders may request use of the chapel inside the facility and offer religious services to inmates. The law prohibits requiring unnecessary work by prisoners on Sunday and other major Christian holidays (Christmas and Good Friday) and by prisoners recorded as belonging to other religions on their recognized days of religious observance. The law allows the provision of religious scriptures and other books of religious observance to prisoners.

To enter the country and proselytize, foreign religious workers require a multientry visa that costs 100 Belize dollars (\$50) and is valid for one year. Applicants must also purchase a religious worker's permit that costs 50 Belize dollars (\$25) and is renewable annually. Visa applications request information on an applicant's intended length of stay, location of service, availability of funding for their activity, and specific purpose. Members of all religious groups are eligible to obtain visas. While a group does not need to be locally registered, a recommendation by a locally registered religious group lends more credibility to the visa request, according to local authorities.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In January, the government expanded the title and scope of the Ministry of Public Service and Constitutional and Political Reform to include Religious Affairs, with the stated objective of improving the government's communication with all the country's religious organizations. In remarks on the launch of the new office and renaming the ministry, the Minister of Public Service, Constitutional and Political Reform, and Religious Affairs, Henry Charles Usher, welcomed "the opportunity of merging the public service with the Christian fundamental principles upon which our country is based." The NEAB and BCC commended the government for creating the portfolio. The NEAB stated it was "appropriate and fitting for such an initiative to be in place for the betterment of all Belizeans." Members of the LGBTQI+ community, however, immediately expressed "concern over the ambiguity" of the new office, saying it would result in further prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQI+ individuals and efforts to promote equality. Prime Minister Briceño stated there was a need for the new office to improve government communication with all religious groups, including non-Christian ones. Senator Benguche said that through the new office, religious groups were better positioned to raise and discuss matters of national importance, including crime, poverty, and education.

According to Senator Benguche, some non-Christian religious groups, including Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at, participated in the church senator's activities, but most of these groups said they had chosen not to play a role in the senator's appointment. Religious leaders said there was a desire among other religious groups for a more inclusive platform to elevate concerns to the government. The church senator's activities included government consultations on legislation and issues of national importance.

On March 31, a bill to legalize the recreational use, commercial production, and sale of cannabis received majority support in parliament, requiring only the governor general's signature to become law. In May, a coalition of churches, including the BCC and the NEAB, submitted a formal request to the governor general for a national referendum on the legalization of cannabis. Senator Benguche said the churches decided to submit the petition "because we think [the bill] is a backward step being undertaken in the name of a new growth industry." In July, the governor general approved the churches' request and informed the Office of the Prime Minister of the constitutional requirement to hold a referendum. Due to the referendum's expense, on August 4, the church coalition and the government agreed to defer the referendum until banking issues related to cannabis proceeds could be resolved. NEAB representatives said the NEAB was concerned the government intended to include the issue of removing the British monarch as the country's head of state in the referendum, thereby creating confusion among the electorate. NEAB representatives also said the government had failed to "properly" consult them on the proposed law before it went to parliament. The BAEC noted that while the proposed legislation intended to regulate the sale of cannabis, government involvement in commercial cannabis production and distribution remained unclear.

Despite major opposition by some religious groups, BCC and NEAB representatives said they would consider legalizing cannabis for medicinal purposes only.

Throughout the year, the government held discussions with the BCC, BAEC, NEAB, Senator Benguche, and several other religious leaders regarding new legislation and amendments to existing laws, including amendments to the criminal code, the marriage act, and misuse of the drugs bill (legalization of cannabis).

According to the BAEC, the government exercised more influence in evangelical Protestant school administration by changing the board structure overseeing schools comanaged by government and religious organizations. BAEC and NEAB representatives said the government's Teaching Service Commission did not allow religious leaders to freely employ the "most spiritually fit" teachers. BAEC representatives also said there was a lack of government support for church-run school meal programs. NEAB representatives stated that while the government did not discriminate against its religious activities, it "tried to restrict" the role of church leaders regarding the comanagement of schools and administration of religious curriculum. According to NEAB representatives, of grave concern was what it considered to be an "LGBT agenda" applied in the school curriculum under the guise of human rights.

In February, Prime Minister Briceño and other government officials and national religious leaders, including Catholic Church Bishop Lawrence Nicasio and Methodist Church Bishop Benguche, attended the opening of the new Ahmadiyya Muslim Noor Mosque in Belize City. Prime Minister Briceño stated the group "has played a positively influential role in the lives of many ... to build a brotherhood and a community that contributes to Belize's continued development." According to members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, the government supported them in "most of their activities" where they sought partnership, including outreach programs for at-risk youth and humanitarian assistance to marginalized communities.

In July, the government introduced a bill to establish the People's Constitutional Commission to review the constitution and to provide recommendations to the National Assembly. Minister Usher officially launched the commission on November 14. After seeking nominations from religious groups, he appointed

Maria Zabaneh of the BCC as the principal commissioner and Lance Lewis of the NEAB as the alternate. Religious leaders said the government expected these two Christian organizations to consult with all religious groups. According to Senator Benguche, he consulted with all religious leaders regardless of affiliation and encouraged their contributions on national issues. Benguche also stated his commitment to strengthen relations with the Muslim community but said non-Christian religious groups had not communicated their perspectives regarding the People's Constitutional Commission to him, even though he is legally responsible for representing all religious groups in the National Assembly.

During meetings with the Ministry of Public Service, Constitutional and Political Reform, and Religious Affairs, church representatives said they expressed concerns regarding the rise in crime, limited access to education in some parts of the country, and the rise in poverty. Church leaders also expressed concerns regarding proposed amendments to the law on marriage, saying the amendments could be interpreted as permitting same-sex marriage. During parliamentary sessions, Senator Benguche stated that he repeatedly requested the government conduct public business with transparency and accountability regarding anticorruption.

According to prison officials, authorities allowed inmates to communicate with religious officiants by mail and to receive counselling from spiritual leaders, including from the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.

The Belize Defense Force (BDF) continued to retain a nondenominational chaplain and space for religious observance. With prior BDF consent, any religious group could use the space for worship.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The interfaith Belize Chaplain Service (BCS), which includes representatives from the Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal Churches, the

Salvation Army, and the Chinese Christian Mission, as well as Muslim and Baha'i leaders, held limited visits to hospital patients because of continuing COVID-19-related health regulations. The BCS did not resume services to the country's sole prison and to hospitals after the lifting of most COVID-19 health restrictions in April. During the year, the BCC distributed meals to COVID-19 first responders in the health and security sectors.

According to the Belize Broadcasting Authority, 15 registered religious-based radio stations operated in the country. The Belize Broadcasting Authority said evangelical Protestant groups continued to own and operate most of the stations. Other stations included Catholic, Mennonite, and Pentecostal.

The Catholic Church-inspired Kolbe Foundation continued to manage the Belize Central Prison, the country's only prison, with a focus on rehabilitating inmates. It provided support for all religious denominations within the inmate population, subject to the availability of a suitable chaplain. According to the BCC, the foundation continued to respect dietary restrictions for prisoners of diverse religious backgrounds. During the year, the Anglican Dioceses sent fruit and cards to women inmates and distributed prayer request forms to all prison inmates who requested prayers on their behalf.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at organized the annual World Religions Conference, an event focused on peace and unity in which many faith-based organizations participated. Ahmadiyya Muslim community members said that in general, they enjoyed societal acceptance, but not from members of other Muslim communities, who did not recognize the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. They also stated that private sector companies were reluctant to grant leave or accommodations for Friday prayers.

On November 19, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at wished the citizens of the country a Happy Garifuna Settlement Day, stating on its Facebook page, "This act of Belize accepting the ancestors of the now vibrant Garifuna people reminds us of when the people of Medina accepted The Holy Prophet and his companions in

their town at their time of need. This day is one of acceptance and selfless love at a time of need and vulnerability.”

According to media outlets in June, during a celebration of Mass, a Catholic priest denied the eucharist to a child from the rural Toledo district. The villagers expressed discontent with the priest’s decision and collected signatures to demand an explanation. The priest later stated publicly the child and her family belonged to a “breakaway church” that was not part of the Catholic Church, and therefore, he could not give her communion.

According to media reports in June, the father of a five-year-old child filed a complaint with the Ministry of Education, accusing an evangelical Protestant primary school and a Seventh-day Adventist primary school of discrimination after the child was not allowed to enroll in either school because of his dreadlocks. The father, Kevin Pollard, said he and his family were practicing Rastafarians and his son’s dreadlocks were consistent with their religious beliefs. According to Pollard, when he tried to register his son, first at the Ladyville Evangelical school, school authorities said the child could not register until he cut his hair. Pollard said he received the same response from the Ladyville Seventh-day Adventist school. Pollard told the press the incident was not the first time his family had endured “victimization” for being Rastafarian. He said they had “been faced with this type of rejection from all sectors” of society.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials, including the Chargé d’Affaires, continued to reiterate the importance of religious tolerance in meetings with government officials, including the prime minister, minister of foreign affairs, and opposition representatives. In March, an embassy official met with Senator Benguche to better understand religious leaders concern with cannabis legalization.

In February, the Chargé met with a representative from the BCC to discuss the council's priorities. Embassy officials also engaged with representatives of the Muslim and the Jewish communities.

The embassy used social media, including Facebook and Twitter, to highlight the importance of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity. Messages underscored the importance of protecting and advancing the fundamental right of religious freedom, including the freedom to worship safely in the country.